



Part 1: News Analysis
Issue 20 (2008)
May 9 - May 15, 2008

Keeping up with his intensive round of multilateral and bilateral diplomacy, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov this week received Robert Simmons, the NATO secretary general's special representative for the South Caucasus and Central Asia, announced an official state visit to Azerbaijan May 19-20, and telephoned both Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin to congratulate them on their new posts.

Turkmen state media coverage of the NATO meeting focused on Simmons' expression of gratitude to President Berdymukhamedov for his visit to Afghanistan last week and for Turkmenistan's continued economic and energy assistance to war-torn Afghanistan. Simmons was also said to appreciate President Berdymukhamedov's advocacy for the Trans-Afghan gas pipeline project – still to be finalized – and his campaign for the security of export pipelines.

In his meeting with the NATO representative, the Turkmen leader stressed the UN's role in bringing about peace in Afghanistan and highlighted Turkmenistan's own close cooperation with the UN. In a related development, the UN announced that the Secretary General's new special representative Miroslav Jenca will take up his post on June 1 as head of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia (UNRCCA). Most coverage of the UNRCCA until now has focused on regional stability and conflict prevention. But in a statement to Slovak media, Amb. Jenca indicated the scope of the mission could be broader, including environmental problems and human rights, while also addressing relations among Central Asia nations themselves. The UN will also assist Turkmenistan in eliminating poverty through a program to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

Turkmenistan had a seven-year long period of icy relations with Azerbaijan over border and debt disputes, but has recently reestablished its embassy in Baku and bolstered economic cooperation and cultural exchanges. The diplomatic flurry seems aimed at resolving the main thorn in the relationship, demarcation of the Caspian seabed. It is unclear whether any major breakthrough on the boundary issue can be expected from next week's summit.

A May 12 cabinet meeting focused on grandiose new construction projects, including a tall monument to celebrate the Turkmen Constitution that Berdymukhamedov said would "symbolize Turkmen statehood." A new administrative and cultural complex dubbed "Ashgabat-city" will contain lavish facilities for special state occasions, international sports competitions and cultural events, all surrounded by parks and fountains. Some US \$53 million will be spent on three regional state museums. A 109-million euro (\$168 million) project to construct a 25-story office building for the gas and oil ministry was also approved.

Economic and social reforms, meanwhile, appear to be proceeding at a pace slower than the construction of ceremonial edifices. This week, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported that the Internet centers pointed to as evidence of the Turkmen leader's liberalizing policies were in fact often closed, in need of repair, or saddled with poor connections. Forum 18 News Service reported that religious believers were criticizing their inability to gain permission to gather and build houses of worship, saying the government registered a handful of groups in the capital to show off to foreigners while denying the same rights to those in the provinces.

Russian telecommunications firm MTS raised some prospect of increased Internet access and freedom of communication with an announcement that it plans to invest \$150 million in Turkmenistan in the coming year, including in high-speed Internet access. The company's subscribers have more than doubled in the past year.

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1. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

a. Turkmen Leader, NATO Envoy Discuss Afghanistan Stability, Pipeline Security

Original title: Turkmen Leader, NATO Envoy Discuss Ensuring Afghan Peace. Excerpt and translation by OSI Turkmenistan Project
Source: Official Turkmen government website/Turkmenistan State Information Agency (TD)/BBC Monitoring--Central Asia/05/13/08TV
Altyn Asyr/05/12/08
Full version: <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/en/?idr=1&id=080513b>

Excerpt: [Presenter] Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov received Robert Simmons, the NATO secretary general's special representative for the South Caucasus and Central Asia on May 12.

[Passage omitted: greetings and expressions of appreciation for organization of recent NATO summit in Bucharest in which Turkmenistan participated.]

At the meeting, Robert Simmons indicated that NATO intended to strengthen its relations with Turkmenistan, taking into account the country's neutral status. In this context, the parties discussed prospects for effective cooperation in preventing emergencies and natural disasters, as well as eliminating their consequences.

Robert Simmons congratulated the Turkmen state leader on his successful visit to Afghanistan, noting that this visit was very important in terms of strengthening Afghanistan's prestige in the world and its social and economic development.

Simmons emphasized the significance of Turkmenistan's support and assistance to its neighboring country, and said he appreciated the efforts made by President Berdymukhamedov to push ahead with the most important regional projects, including the Trans-Afghan gas pipeline project, as well as his initiative to ensure the security of export pipeline networks. In this regard, Simmons also stressed the UN's role as a center for consolidating the world community.

For his part, President Berdymukhamedov said that Turkmenistan, which adheres to a policy of positive neutrality, would take the most active part in international efforts, including partnership within the UN, to ensure peace and prosperity in Afghanistan.

[Passage omitted: Simmons interviewed with praise for Berdymukhamedov and his reforms.]

b. Slovak Diplomat Jenca to Assume UN Post in Turkmenistan on June 1

Source: TASR-SLOVAKIA/05/14/08. Synopsis prepared by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: <http://www.tasr.sk/30.axd?k=20080514TBB00110>

Synopsis: Slovak diplomat Miroslav Jenca, recently appointed as Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and Head of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia (UNRCCA), will take up his post June 1, TASR-SLOVAKIA reported. Jenca said the decision was made at a meeting with UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon on May 13. Five or six international officials from other UN member states will also be appointed to the mission, he said. Jenca said the scope of the UNRCCA will be broad, enhancing the UN's potential in the region. "This involves virtually everything, from security risks in Central Asia, economic issues and environmental problems to human rights," TASR-SLOVAKIA quoted him as saying.

Jenca said that the Secretary General explained part of his job will be to increase cooperation and trust between Central Asian countries. Ban noted the significant role of Slovak diplomacy in the region, complimenting current Slovak Foreign Affairs Minister Jan Kubis for his past role as Secretary General of the OSCE and Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Tajikistan.

c. UNDAF Meeting in Ashgabat Reviews Millennium Development Goals

Original title: Turkmenistan-UN: Towards Achieving the Millennium Development Goals

Source: Official Turkmen government website/State News Agency of Turkmenistan (TD)/05/13/08. Excerpt by OSI Turkmenistan Project.

Full version: <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/en/?idr=5&id=080513a>

Excerpt: The outcomes of joint activities and priorities for further cooperation were discussed at a meeting devoted to implementation of the UN Assistance for Development Framework Programme (UNDAF). Heads and specialists of local offices of UN agencies and representatives of the key national ministries and departments and large public organizations directly involved in implementing the joint projects in the country took part in the meeting.

[Passage omitted: on signing of four-year Framework Program in 2005 for improving health care, environmental protection and other areas of social policy.]

In opening remarks, Richard Young, UN permanent coordinator in Turkmenistan, said UNDAF provided the Turkmen government assistance in achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals and also meeting its targets in national development programs. Young said that Turkmenistan's policy of progressive reforms and changes reflected in President Berdymukhamedov's principle of "a state for the people" was in line with the UN's main standards and values.

[Passages omitted: on draft of 2010-2014 plan and on importance of long-term cooperation for progress, peace and prosperity.]

d. President Berdymukhamedov Greets New Russian President Dmitry Medvedev

Original title: President Dmitry Medvedev Had a Telephone Conversation with President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov

Source: Official Russian government website/05/08/08.

Full version: <http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/sdocs/news.shtml>

President Dmitry Medvedev had a telephone conversation with President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. President Berdymukhamedov congratulated President Medvedev on his inauguration as head of state and wished him success in his new office.

The two presidents noted increased activity in various areas of cooperation between the two countries and expressed confidence that ties between Russia and Turkmenistan would continue to develop. President Berdymukhamedov invited President Medvedev to visit Turkmenistan. President Medvedev accepted the invitation with thanks. The specific dates for a visit will be arranged through diplomatic channels.

President Berdymukhamedov confirmed his intention to accept the invitation to take part in the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg on June 6-8, 2008.

The two presidents congratulated each other and their peoples on the Victory Day holiday.

The conversation took place at Turkmenistan's initiative.

e. President Berdymukhamedov to Visit Azerbaijan May 19-20

Original title: President of Turkmenistan to Visit Azerbaijan on May 19-20

Source: Azeri Press Agency (APA)/05/13/08. Synopsis by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: <http://en.apa.az/news.php?id=48714>

Synopsis: President Berdymukhamedov will make an official visit to Azerbaijan on May 19-20, APA reported, citing diplomatic sources. At a cabinet meeting of the Turkmen government on May 12, Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov reported to the president on preparations for the visit. The Turkmen leader confirmed the delegation's composition and stressed the importance of the negotiations, where a joint political declaration and several cooperation agreements are anticipated.

2. DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS

a. Internet Cafes Closed, Blocked in Turkmenistan: Human Rights Group

Original title: Internet Failed

Source: Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR)/05/12/08. Reprinted with permission from TIHR.

Full version: <http://www.chrono-tm.org/?0257044074000000000000011000000>

The Internet cafés recently launched with grand openings throughout Turkmenistan are now being closed down. A major reason is that Turkmentelecom has failed to ensure the appropriate transmission speed.

Since February 2007, 15 Internet cafés have been opened across the country, but the hourly rate of 90,000 manats [about US \$3.60] scared away many visitors at first. Last August, the fees dropped to 60,000 manats [about US \$2.40] and recently decreased even to 30,000 manats [about \$1.20], which helped to attract new users. At the same time, however, the decrease in Internet fees resulted in a deterioration of the quality of Internet access and a slowing of the connection speed. This led to the closure of one of the two Internet cafés in Dashoguz, at the Uzboy Hotel. Visitors complained about the low-speed connection.

Meanwhile, the only remaining Internet cafe operating in the entire city of Dashoguz, which is the administrative center of Turkmenistan's northern-most province, is located in the building of the Central Postal and Communications Center. Only 5 computers are available. One computer is always occupied by a female operator, and another is permanently out of order. Some 3 to 5 people are usually lined up to use the three remaining computers. Yet, the queue is formed not because there are too many people wishing to use the Internet, but due to a very slow connection.

"We used to spend 10-15 minutes sending a couple of e-mail messages or checking mailboxes, but now it takes over an hour." visitors complain. Yet, they have no choice. The Dashoguz cafe is open only on work

days from 9 a.m. till 6 p.m. and is closed Sundays and public holidays. During morning hours, connection errors are frequent.

Only those visitors using the Internet cafe for the first time are requested to show their passports. Regular visitors are not asked to present identification as their personal data has been already been filed in a registry. Virtually all websites that post critical publications about Turkmenistan are blocked from access. According to some sources, access to such websites is denied even through computers at the Resource and Information Centers launched under the auspices of various foreign embassies and international organizations.

b. Turkmen Protestant Laments Lack of Places of Worship

Original title: *Commentary: Why Can't All Religious Communities Have Places of Worship?*

Source: *Forums 18 News Service/forums18.org/05/13/08*

Full version: http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1128

One of the biggest problems faced by religious believers in Turkmenistan is not being able to freely maintain public places of worship, a Turkmen Protestant from a region far from the capital argues in a personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service. "You cannot build, buy, or securely rent such property, let alone put up a notice outside saying 'This is a place of worship,'" the Protestant comments. "All kinds of obstructions are imposed, whether through rules or just in practice," the commentary continues, noting that "whenever officials raid our meetings the first thing they ask is: 'Where's your registration certificate?' The government likes to be able to say to outsiders 'We have registration' and show them communities in Ashgabat. But people don't look at what we experience in places away from the capital, where we have no hope of registration." The Turkmen concludes that "without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief."

c. Turkmen Leader Reviews Urban Development Projects

Original title: *A Sitting of the Cabinet of Ministers*

Source: *Official Turkmen government website/State News Agency of Turkmenistan (TDH)/05/13/08*

Full version: <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/en/?idr=1&id=080513c>

Synopsis: At a cabinet meeting on May 12, President Berdimukhamedov heard reports on urban development projects designed by the Turkish firm Polimeks, including a new administrative and cultural city center in Ashgabat, the official Turkmen government website reported, citing the State News Agency of Turkmenistan (TDH). A model of the new monument to the constitution was also presented. The Turkmen leader urged the construction company to ensure the monument be of the highest quality.

A cultural and entertainment center is to be built to the south of the Palace of the Halk Maslakhaty (parliament). Other new constructions include a sports complex with a stadium, gym, track, indoor tennis court, pool and other sport facilities designed to host international sports competitions, as well as a wedding palace and neighboring park.

The Polimeks representatives presented a model for a large complex to host cultural events and special occasions, based on the president's earlier comments. A hotel for participants in official celebrations is to be constructed nearby. A highway is also to be constructed near the center. In sum, the president urged that the projects should combine both Turkmen architectural traditions and modern technology. The constructions should "serve as man-made symbols of the Era of New Revival," he said, adding that foreign contractors must strictly observe deadlines and quality control.

d. Turkmen Constitution Monument to "Symbol Statehood"

Original title: *Constitution Monument to Rise to the Height of 185 Meters*

Source: *turkmenistan.ru/05/13/08. Synopsis by OSI Turkmenistan Project*

Full version: http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=12754&type=event&sort=date_desc

Synopsis: At a government meeting May 12, a model of a monument to the Turkmen Constitution was presented to President Berdymukhamedov, turkmenistan.ru reported, citing the State News Agency of Turkmenistan (TDH). The tower, which Turkish company Polimeks will build, is to be octagonal to symbolize Turkic hero Oguz Khan's star. Its height will be 185 meters, in honor of the constitution's date of adoption – the 18th day of the fifth month of the year. The complex will include a large park with fountains. The president said the monument would be a “symbol of Turkmenistan's statehood,” TDH quoted him as saying.

e. Turkmenistan to Rebuild Circus, Cinemas

Original title: Turkish Companies to Reconstruct Cinemas and Circus in Ashgabat

Source: turkmenistan.ru/05/13/08. Synopsis by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=12753&type=event&sort=date_desc

Synopsis: At a cabinet meeting May 12th, President Berdymukhamedov ordered the reconstruction of two cinemas and the Turkmen State Circus, turkmenistan.ru reported. The Ministry of Culture, TV and Radio will oversee two contracts with Turkish firms totaling US \$20 million to rebuild the Watan and Turkmenistan cinemas. The circus will be reconstructed for US \$17.9 million, including the addition of an underground traffic tunnel. The projects are slated for completion in the fall of 2009.

3. ECONOMIC NEWS

a. Russian MTS to Invest \$150 million in Turkmenistan; More than Doubled Subscribers in Past Year

Original title: MTS Subscriber Base in Turkmenistan Grows 2.5 Times in 12 Months; MTS to Invest Some US \$150 Million in Projects in Turkmenistan

Source: turkmenistan.ru/05/09/08; 05/13/08. Synopsis prepared by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=12740&type=event&sort=date_desc
http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=12760&type=event&sort=date_desc

Synopsis: At a meeting with President Berdymukhamedov May 13, Leonid Melamed, president of Russia's Mobile Telesystems (MTS), said his company will invest at least US \$150 million in joint projects in Turkmenistan over the next three years, turkmenistan.ru reported. MTS hopes to increase its subscribers to a million by providing Turkmenistan with the latest telecommunications technologies, including high-speed Internet and ring-tones based on Turkmen melodies, he said.

MTS says it now has more than 500,000 subscribers in Turkmenistan, a 250 percent increase over the last year, turkmenistan.ru reported separately, citing MTS's press office. Dmitry Shchukin, acting director for MTS's Turkmen branch, said his company had improved infrastructure and customer service as well as increased coverage to draw in more users. MTS now leads the mobile market in Turkmenistan, with a market share of 85.5 percent in the first quarter of 2008. The company has placed base stations in all areas where the population exceeds 2,000.

MTS also plans to invite a group of 20 Turkmen students for training in leading Russian universities and will support other training programs in Turkmenistan.

The state-owned company Altyn Asyr, a subsidiary of Turkmentelekom, is the other mobile company operating in Turkmenistan.

b. Bouygues Wins 109 Million Construction Contract in Turkmenistan

Original title: Bouygues Wins 109 Mln Euro Construction Contract in Turkmenistan -- Report

Source: Forbes/Thomson Financial News/Neitral'niy Turkmenistan/05/13/08. Synopsis prepared by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: <http://www.forbes.com/afxnews/limited/feeds/afx/2008/05/13/afx5000612.html>

Synopsis: The French company Bouygues has won a Turkmen construction contract worth more than 109 million euros, Thomson Financial News reported, citing *Neitral'niy Turkmenistan*. President Berdymukhamedov has authorized Bouygues to begin building 25-story offices for the Turkmen government's oil industry administration. The project is slated for completion in 2010. Bouygues has already completed other famous buildings in the country such as a mausoleum for former Turkmen leader Saparmurat Niyazov, the largest mosque in Central Asia, and several buildings for government ministries.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations have been prepared by OSI's Turkmenistan Project.

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